Morton's Thought and Ecological Crisis in Selected Niger Delta Novels

Audu, Ajama John

University of Lagos

ajama.john@yahoo.com

DOI: *https://doi.org/*10.5281/zenodo.14599823

Abstract

Much of the existing critical works on the Niger Delta literary oeuvre concern themselves with the extent of destruction to which the ecosystem has been subjected, the concomitant violent resistance, and their impacts on the survival of the people of the region. While these efforts are commendable, they do not offer lasting solutions to the ecological crisis for which the region has become infamous. As a deviation from this critical tradition, this paper attempts to show the root causes of the ecological crisis in the Niger Delta region as well as how to bring the crisis under control. To do this, three novels – Isidore Okpewho's *Tides*, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away* were studied using Timothy Morton's concept of The Ecological Thought which anthropomorphizes the ecosystem in a bid to avert the destructive activities of both the resisters and the oil explorers. The paper concludes that when humans fully understand the interconnectedness and radical intimacy that exist between them and other "beings" in nature, ecological equilibrium will be easily achieved.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, Ecological Crisis, Ecological Thought, Radical Intimacy

Introduction

The Niger Delta is an resource-rich region in Nigeria. The region has long suffered from environmental degradation and violence due to extensive oil extraction. Oil spills, gas flaring, and deforestation have devastated local ecosystems, contaminated water sources and farmland, and led to loss of livelihoods for indigenous communities. Consequently, the relevance of the Niger Delta writer depends largely on their ability to present the stark realities of the social, political, and ecological conundrums the region has been enmeshed in since the inception of oil exploration in 1950s. As Kolawole Ogungbesan rightly avers, "if literature is relevant at all, it is because we can obtain some pictures of society and life from it (26). It then follows that any writer of the Niger Delta fiction who fails to depict the petroleum generated ecological crisis in the region "must" in Wole Soyinka's words, "recognize that his [or her] choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of chronicler and post-mortem surgeon" (Cited in Biodun Jeyifo 59). It is from this perspective that the works of Isidore Okpewho, Helon Habila, and Christie Watson examined in this paper, and many others of the same ideological leanings, find their true essence. Indeed, it is the authors' dexterous weaving of the ecological concerns in the tapestry of their creativity that justifies their selection for examination in this research work.

Two of the novels under consideration in this paper –Okpewho's Tides and Habila Oil on Water feature veteran journalists as narrators in spite of the differences in narrative techniques employed by the authors. This study is of the opinion that the authors' choices of journalists in both novels give a better picture of the Niger Delta region and the issues confronting them in the form of objective reportage. The choice of Tonwe and Piriye (natives) as the narrative voices in Tides and Zaq and Rufus (a native and a non-native) in Oil on Water are not only symbolic of collaboration and objectivity in the reportorial processes but also demonstrate "insider's" versus "extended-insider's" representation of the crisis respectively.

If objectivity is achieved through the narrative techniques of Tides and Oil on Water, it is heightened in Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away through its protagonist, Blessing. Watson uses the *I* of a child narrator in the character of Blessing, a 13year old girl, which speaks volume of the objectivity in the depiction of the crisis in the region. Through the character of Blessing, Watson, having lived in London where the novel was written, gives an "outsider's" account of the crisis.

Unmistakably, both Tides and Oil on Water could be read as a connected sequence, like V. S. Naipaul's Miguel Street or Habila's Waiting for an Angel, since they both have same temporal and partly spatial settings and symmetrical thematic preoccupation, with the only major difference being in publication dates which have also registered some differing nuances in the narratological processes. However, the evident progression in the dimensions of ecological crisis in both novels and Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away necessitate a rotational reading of these novels in their order of publications. Guiding the analysis is Timothy Morton's theory of The Ecological Thought.

Critical Receptions of the Niger Delta Fiction

The attention that the Niger Delta crisis is receiving in the critical and literary universe has assumed an upward progression in recent years. One can conveniently argue that the region has witnessed a cornucopia of critical essays whose crux is the environmental problems discussed under interchangeable epithets. It is even more enthralling to note that the literature of the region has occupied one of the highest echelons of research interests for both students in higher degrees and seasoned scholars alike which mean well for the literary producers of/about the region. This is because in Bernth Lindfors opinion,

> [t]o be famous, to be reputable, to be deemed worthy of serious and sustained consideration, an author needs as much criticism as possible, year after year after year. Only those who pass this test of time—the test of persistent published interest in their art—will stand a chance of earning literary immortality. (143)

Congruently, given the critical attention writers like Ken Saro-Wiwa, Isidore Okpewho, Tanure Ojaide, and more recently Vincent Egbuson, Helon Habila, Ifeoma May, Christie Watson, Kaine Agary, among others are receiving from literary critics, one could conveniently conclude that these writers are gradually earning for themselves "literary immortality" through their faithful representation of the ecological crisis in the Niger Delta region.

It is however surprising that the critical influx these writers and their works have received have failed to sufficiently engage the radical intimacy or interconnectedness between both living and the non-living beings in the ecosystem which is the crux of ecological thought. Thus, most of the existing critical exercises are purely anthropocentric rather than ecocentric. In other words, human safety and survival rather than the environment itself is the focal point of these works. For instance, Philip Aghoghovwia (2014) examines the ways environmental concerns and the phenomenon of oil production in the Niger Delta are captured in contemporary literary representations by situating the "Niger Delta representations of the oil encounter within the intellectual frame of petrocultures" (iii). He analyses the texts in the light of how oil extraction is an intrinsic form of violence on the landscape and human population in the oil sites of the Niger Delta.

Calista Ugwu (2014) focuses on the endemic and the unnerving concept of environmental degradation, ecological consciousness, causes and consequences of environmental degradation. He investigates the portraits of degradation of place, innocence, ethos and psyche as well as ecological consciousness in selected novels in what he concludes as "an x-ray of greed, negligence and subversive activities by human beings, which have led to a total privation of a natural environment – the Niger Delta environment – a microcosm of the larger global environment" (11). His approach to the problem of Niger Delta here is commendable, especially in his recognition of the effects of the crisis in Niger Delta area.

Also, Charles Feghabo (2014) sees alienation as the basis of ecoactivism in the region. He also argued that the "collaborative politics that goes with oil and gas exploration in the region has had negative impacts on the people's psyche and their ecosystem, triggering the violent environmentalism in the area" (16). Feghabo's celebratory reading of violent acts of resistance set his work at variance with the present research. In fact, this research argues that violence is an agent of ecological degradation which should be discouraged forthwith

Again, one thing that is common to all these critics and many others not mentioned here is their obsession with the effects of ecological crisis on the human beings in the region. Even where environment is mentioned, the focus is human beings. This study contends that such an anthropocentric perspective can only perpetuate the crisis in the region since it has no capacity to address the root cause of the problem which Timothy Morton's ecological thought accounts for.

Morton's Concept of Ecological Thought

In an attempt to deconstruct nature/culture binary, Timothy Morton developed the concept of Ecological Thought in a 2010 book of the same title. The ecological thought considers everything in the universe as entangled, connected and interdependent. This interconnectedness and interdependence Morton calls the mesh. In his words, the "mesh consists of infinite connections and infinitesimal differences" (30). Thus, a distortion in any element in the ecosystem has an overarching effect on all other things within the ecosystem.

In his criticism of anthropocentrism, Morton contends that there is no center and no edge in the relationship between humans and nonhumans in the ecosystem. According to him, a true ecological thought implies "letting go of an idea that it has a center" (38) since all life "forms are the mesh, and so are all dead ones, as are their habitats, which are made up of the living and the nonliving" (29). Ecological Thought calls for an awareness of interconnectedness with the implication of "radical intimacy with other beings" (38) which in turn gives human beings the consciousness that the "destruction of some things will affect other things" (35). For example, the destruction of the Niger Delta ecosystem by multinational oil companies and violent resisters affects the fishes in the river and plants in the field. Through pipeline vandalism, violent resisters violate the ecosystem on which plant and other life forms depend for their existence. In the same vein, humans are also affected directly through hunger and poverty while the workers of the companies are also exposed to health hazard and the kidnapping activities of militant groups. Morton believes that if the notion of "coexistentialism" (47) or interconnectedness is understood "in an open system without center or edge," (39) everyone including capitalists will "have a very powerful argument for things" (38) in the ecosystem. Hence, this concept is relevant in tracing the causes of ecological crises not just from the perspective of the capitalists (multinational oil companies), but also from the perspective of the violent resisters as well as the ordinary locals of the Niger Delta region as portrayed in the selected novels.

Timothy Morton's Ecological Thought and Ecological Crisis in Isidore Okpewho's *Tides*, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away*

Isidore Okpewho hails from the Niger Delta region and his personalized narration of the ordeals of the peoples of the region through the characters of Piriye Dokumo and Tonwe Birisbe is instructive. Through the use of first person singular and plural pronouns (I/we) and possessive adjectives (our/my) to qualify the people of Niger Delta, the reader is made aware of the fact that Okpewho tells his own story of the ecological crisis in the Niger Delta region as an insider who himself is, in some ways, a victim of the crisis. This is further adumbrated by the fact that Tonwe, one of the correspondents who retired to a life of farming and fishing in Seiama (1) but soon discovers that there is "a crisis brewing right by" (2) his doorstep lives in the Niger Delta region from where he reported the ecological imbalance in the region through correspondence. When asked by commander Adetunji if he lives in Warri, Tonwe simply responds, "No, I live in my village in the creeks, in Seiama" (29) where the "noise from exploration machines reduce my desired peace somewhat" (5). Although Tonwe's complaints appear too anthropocentric and selfish, it goes on to show clearly that Okpewho sets out to expose the sufferings of the ordinary man in the region with first-hand information from the creeks in *Tides*.

Commenting on the major themes of Okpewo's Tides, Ferdinand Asoo outlines what he terms "the basic problems of the Niger Delta" which are placed against the exigencies of national interests such as "economic growth, integration and cohesion…conflict between personal, ethnic, regional, professional, racial and national interest" (49). Ultimately, Asoo constricts the problem of Niger Delta region to the problem of environmental degradation (50) brought about by the activities of oil companies in the region. This work agrees with Asoo's line of thought that the crisis in the region is basically environmentally inclined. However, Asoo's opinion appears tangential and out of kilter with Timothy Morton's conceptualization of ecological thought as Asoo puts human beings and their interest at the centre and the non-humans at the periphery. For Morton, all life forms possess "infinite connections and infinitesimal differences" (30). This work opines that the novel is as concerned with human lives as other life forms which is the hallmark of ecological thought. This, perhaps, is why Okpewho does not give the plot of Tides enough time to build up before venturing into the danger to which the lives of the 'peoples' (human and non-human lives) of the region have been exposed. The novel opens with the damaging impacts of oil spillage on the ecosystem of Niger Delta in Piriye's first letter to Tonwe in the opening pages of the novel:

> … the spillage of crude petroleum from the oil rigs down there … has proved an absolute menace to agricultural life, for many farms are practically buried in thick layers of crude, which kills off many fishes and other forms of life (2).

In response to Piriye's letter, Birisibe tells the reader of a group of locals led by Opene who had paid him a visit in a view to getting him to represent them before the government agents to make a case for the ecosystem and their fishing occupation. These uneducated farmers know that "they faced certain disaster if the schools of fish were" (11) killed or forced out of their area. By these

corroboratory reportages, Okpewho seems to be showing the interconnectedness and interdependence of human beings and other life forms in the ecosystem which is the basis of ecological thought. Were Morton to be asked, he would say Okpewho thinks big by showing how human lives depend on non-human forms for survival.

While it is easy for critics like Asoo to conclude that Okpewho's Tides is basically about human interests - national, personal and ethnic (49), Okpewho demonstrates, as the novel develops that human and non-human, are the central focus of the novel. In itemising the dangers of oil pollution on the ecosystem, Okpewho writes:

> Now, the dangers of all this oil pollution to the environment are sufficiently well known to you. The fishes die because the floating oil blocks the oxygen from the water … the birds that dip in the water to catch fish and other foods … drown or die on dry land … the crops [and grasses] won't grow because the oil floating on the irrigation chokes the soil. Even the drinking water is affected (146 my emphasis).

It is lucid from the above that the survival of the "fishes," the "birds," and the "crops" are fundamental to the ideological leaning of the novel. Whereas fishing forms part of the occupational and cultural quiddities of the region, peoples of Niger delta region are not known, both in reality and the fictional zeitgeists, to be fowlers. Hence, Okpewho's argument for the survival of birds, fishes, grass and the purity of drinking water can only be understood in the context of Morton's ecological thought. In Morton's view, ecological thought is "a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are concerned with other beings - animal, vegetable, or mineral. Ultimately, this includes thinking about democracy. What would it be - can we even imagine it?" (Qtd in Iheka86). Okpewho has sufficiently demonstrated this awareness of concern for both humans and other life forms in the novel. The implication of the above is more implicit than otherwise. This is because, the novel attempts to show, without saying it, that it is the lack of this awareness on the part of the oil companies and the Government of Nigeria that led to the ecological degradation and the risk of survival the people of the region face.

It is instructive to note that Okpewho equally expresses concern for water bodies and rivers in Tides. As an insider, he knows the importance of rivers to his people not only in the sense of its utility values but also in its sacredness and tangled existentialism with his people. This is better explained in Ken Saro-Wiwa's words: "To the Ogoni, rivers and streams do not only provide water for life—for bathing, drinking, etc.; they do not only provide fish for food, they are also sacred and are bound up intricately with the life of the community, of the entire Ogoni nation" (12-13). Hence, one of Harrison's main complaints against the multinational oil companies in the region stems from water pollution. According to him,

> Every once in a while the tankers are washed – and that's another source of pollution. The method is called ballasting. Sea water is taken into the tanker to clean out the oil sticking to the insides of

> the hold. The sea water is the ballast, and after the tank has been cleansed it is de-ballasted – that is, the ballast and oil are thrown into the surrounding water. (145)

It is alarming to note that there exists an alternative to de-ballasting call Load-on-Top but "it is seldom practiced" (145) and "de-ballasting goes on all the time" (145) because the drive for profit making by the oil companies makes them oblivious of what Morton calls "ethics of the ecological thought" which is hinged on regarding "beings as people even when they aren't people" (8). In Morton's view therefore, water bodies should also be accorded respect as a being other than human in nature. By centering his narration not only around human beings, Okpewho seems to be saying, the ecological crisis in the Niger Delta region can only be overcome when everything in the ecosystem is given equal treatment as humans.

If Okpewho presents an insider's account of the ecological crisis in Tides, Helon Habila's account of the crisis in Oil on Water can be termed extended-insider's for a number of reasons. Though narrated in the first person point of view, Oil on Water is distinct from Tides in many ways. First, the combination of a native and a non-native journalists – Rufus and Zaq – as narrators in search of a "kidnapped British woman" (1) contrasts starkly with Tides' native journalists – Piriye and Tonwe – whose collaborative plans to write a book about a brewing crisis (2) give rise to the novel. It is apparent that one of the narrators in Tides resides in the creeks from where he exchanges correspondences with his counterpart in Lagos. This brings his personal experiences of the crisis to bear in the narratological processes and in turn adds touches of reality to the story. On the other hand, Rufus and Zaq only came from Lagos on professional duties to make a story out of the kidnapped British woman. It is safe to surmise then that while Habila's story of the ecological crisis in the Niger Delta region is coincidental, Okpewho's is deliberate. This explains why the crisis is presented in Oil on Water like a mere jourrnalistic report without much nuances of personalized experiences of the impacts of the crisis as evident in Tides. Besides, Habila is a Nigerian of Northern extraction who has never lived in the Niger Delta region. Thus, his account of the Niger Delta region as depicted in *Oil on Water* is considered as an "Extended Insider's" view of the crisis in this research.

More importantly, whereas Okpewho uses the first person pronouns to refer to the Niger Delta people, Habila uses the third person pronouns. For example, Rufus' reference to the people of the region as "them," "their," "they," and "the people" (34, 97) even though he is from the region counts him out of those experiencing the effects of the crisis. These referential differences make it all the more clearer that Habila's account is presented from the perspective of an "Extended Insider."

However, it is again worthy of note that Oil on Water can be read like a continuum of Tides since, as said earlier, they represent different phases of the evolution of the crisis. That is, Tides represents the nascent phase of the ecological crisis while Oil on Water represents the advanced stage of the crisis. It is therefore expected that most of the concerns raised in Tides find symmetry with those in Oil on Water albeit in larger proportion.

One thing that stands out and which runs through Oil on Water is anthropomorphism. All through the novel, both humans and non-humans are given equal treatments as victims of oil exploration and exploitation in the region. This is summed up in Maximilian Feldnar's words that Habila's "depiction of the Niger Delta's environmental destruction," is "heightened through rhetorical devices such as the personification of the landscape as a sick and dying person" (1). This implies that central to Habila's thematic concern is not only human but the non-human 'persons' such as birds, crabs, fish, land, water, air, etc. By implication, Habila puts everything in the habitat at the centre of his story. This fittingly situates the novel within the context of Morton's "Ecological Thought" since according to Morton, a true ecological thought implies "letting go of an idea that it has a center" (38) and a periphery.

Congruently, the novel is rife with images that demonstrate a deep concern for all life forms in the ecosystem. This concern, in the opinion of this work, is motivated by the awareness of
the indispensable interconnectedness that exist between the human and non-human persons in the ecosystem. Rufus's imagination of a polluted water body and its suffocating effects on the living things that inhabit it does not only express this concern but also serves as a strong social criticism against the oil companies for the neglect of the ecosystem. According to him, "thousands
of gallons of oil floating on the water, the weight of the oil tight like a hangman's noose around the neck of whatever life-form lay underneath" (227). The passage exemplifies a state of utter abandonment of the Niger Delta landscape to be despoiled by oil. It is also suggestive of the fact that oil remains the hangman whose "noose" hangs around the neck of the peoples, villages, animals and things in the Niger Delta ecosystem.

It is therefore not surprising that Habila records deaths of everything orchestrated by oil pollution and the concomitant violence with painstaking details. For instance, one of the first villages Rufus and Zaq visited "looked as if deadly epidemic had swept through it" (7). This implies that either the people deserted the village or are all dead. In fact, the "houses seemed to belong more to the trees and forest behind them than they did to a domestic human settlement" (10, my emphasis). Habila's choice of "domestic human settlement" presupposes that the "trees and forest" are non-domestic humans deserving of settlements too. By this depiction, Habila simply succeeds in treating, to use Morton's words, "many more beings as people while deconstructing our ideas of what counts as people" (8). As they go further, they "found a chicken pen with about ten chickens inside, all dead and decomposing, the maggots trafficking beneath the feathers" (7). All these heighten the image of death and decomposition that characterize the Niger Delta villages.

Similarly, Habila pays close attention to the effect of oil pollution on the aquatic life as well as the flora and fauna. Almost everywhere water or river is mentioned in the novel, the reader is presented with images of death and contamination, symbolic of the plight of the peoples of the Niger Delta region. In Rufus words, "We followed a bend in the river and in front of us we saw dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots" (8). The fish are not only dead but also caught between tree roots like the peoples of the region who are caught between the rebel and the

army after losing their sources of livelihood. To pursue this loss of aquatic and arboreal lives to a logical conclusion, Habila writes, "Over the black, expressionless water there were no birds or fish or other water creatures …" (9). This is why the Doctor clearly states, "I've been in these waters five years now and I tell you this place is a dead place, a place of dying" (142 -3). The Doctor's conclusion is critical to this study because it is an implicit suggestion that the willful despoliation of the ecosystem translates into death of human and non-human peoples in the ecosystem. It goes on to illustrate Morton's argument that the "destruction of some things will affect other things" (35). In essence, Habila seems to be saying that if this knowledge is taken into cognizance, the ecosystem of the Niger Delta would have been preserved and so would have been all the life forms.

Interestingly, Okonta, Ike and Oronto Douglas in their work, Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human rights, and Oil in the Niger Delta, refer to the ecological crisis in the Niger Delta region as a kind of war "whose victims are hapless people and the land on which they have lived and thrived for centuries" (63-4). Their categorization of not only people but also land as a victim of the crisis stems from their tacit recognition of land as a non-living being that should be catered for. This perhaps accounts for why Habila treats the victimized landscape much the same way he does the people and animals in the novel. For him then, "the ruined, decomposing landscape" (55) is in "radical intimacy with other beings" (Morton, 38) that inhabit it. Therefore the effects of the pollution of the landscape results in suffocation of grass, "each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker's hands" (8-9).

In a manner of summary of the impact of the ecological crisis on the people and "strange strangers," Habila lists:

> The forsaken villages, the gas flares, the stumps of pipes from exhausted wells with their heads capped and left jutting out of the oil-scorched earth, and ever present pipelines crisscrossing the landscape, sometimes like tree roots surfacing far away from the parent tree, and sometimes like diseased veins on the back of old shriveled hand…..the carcasses of the fish and crabs and water birds that folated on the deserted beaches of these tiny towns and villages and islands every morning killed by oil … (182)

The passage is important to this study in its personification of most of the things listed and their dead or diseased state arising from utter neglect. In Morton's view, these things are "the neighbor, the strange stranger, and the hyper-object" (135) that should be catered for.

Finally, Rufus' conclusion is worth evoking here. According to him, of "all the things that I saw that day, and all the words I heard, what made the most impression was the sight of the broken statues. The arms and legs and heads sundered from the body" (157). The statue referred to here is Habila's symbol of an ecosystem in a topsy-turvy state. The broken body parts are symbolic of the disconnection between the ecosystem and every being in it, living and non-living,

with the resultant effects of dislocation, hunger, disease, and death. This again brings to the fore the
importance of taking Morton‘s concept of ecological thought seriously in addressing the ecological crisis in the Niger Delta region.

If Oil on Water presents an extended insider‘s account of the ecological crisis in the Niger Delta region, Christie Watson‘s account of the crisis in Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away is rendered from the perspective of an “outsider.” Though married to a Nigerian, Christie Watson is a British writer who never lived in Nigeria. Having spent her life in South London, it is plausible to conclude that her account of the Niger Delta crisis is basically premised on media narratives and information obtained from people and the internet. Watson herself, in an interview admitted that she “had made a lot of visits and talk to a lot of people for research but we go there anyway.” This shows that her visits to Nigeria are very few and far in between which denies her the experiential knowledge of the crisis that her novel portrays. While this does not serve as an impediment to her narration and the picture of the Niger Delta she paints, it lays credence to her classification, in the context of this research work, as an outsider.

In addition, Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away has very scanty pictorial representations of the despoiled and polluted environment of the Niger Delta region in comparison with Okpewho’s Tides, Habila’s Oil on Water, Hope Eghagha’s Emperor of Salvation, Tanure Ojaide’s The Activist, May Ifeoma’s Oil Cemetery, and many other literary works whose main focus is the ecological crisis in the Niger Delta region. Unlike Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away which attempts to treat heterogeneous themes alongside ecological crisis, these works concentrate on issues that are all tied to the politics of oil and the ecological war that has become synonymous with the region. This makes Shatto Gakwandi‘s remarks in reference to Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s Petals of Blood also fitting for Watson’s Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away. According to Gakwandi, “[t]he Novel's principal weakness is that it attempts to do too much. The author attempts – and to a large extent succeeds– in weaving a pattern around highly disparate and heterogeneous...” (23) themes such as genital mutilation, family crisis, religion, love and relationship, etc. Although her attempt at writing about many things at the same time is considered as a weakness, it shows her readiness as an outsider to present an all-inclusive account of happenings in Nigeria in a single book.

Also, it is important to note that the earliest recorded report of the crisis in *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away* is taken from the internet. After Timi’s divorce, she decides to relocate from Lagos to Warri with her children – Blessing and Ezikiel. On getting to know they have to travel to Warri, Ezikiel declares, “Warri is not safe. And those villages are even worse! Swamp villages! I googled Warri at the internet café. Oil bunkering, hostage taking, illness, guns, and poverty” (8). His mother argues that she grew up there, insisting that Warri is safe but Ezikiel, based on what he reads makes her understand that Warri has “changed then. It‘s dangerous. The whole Delta region. And if we don‘t get shot the bacteria and parasites will surely kill us” (8). Ezikiel gives this prescient warning while still in Lagos based on the available information on the internet. That Ezekiel eventually got shot while picking snails (125) goes a long way to prove that what they read from the internet about the crisis is not too different from the reality. This implies that classifying Watson as an outsider does not make her account of the crisis in the Niger Delta

region inferior to those of Okpewho's and Habila's discussed earlier; it only provides another perspective from which the crisis can be viewed.

Watson, like Okpewho and Habila, shows an ecosystem that is highly anthropomorphised. In her view, there is no difference between a person and their surroundings. That is, humans, like every other thing in their surroundings, are components of their surroundings. On the flip side, their surroundings are also part of them. This is tersely revealed through the character of Blessing in whose eye the story is told. Blessing says, a "person becomes part of their surrounding" (9) in the opening pages of the novel when the idea of relocation is still been mooted. She does indeed become part of the Niger Delta environment at the closing pages of the novel. Blessing is presented with the option of leaving the crisis ridden region for London after losing Ezikiel, her only brother, but she refuses. The only reason she gives for her decision to stay is that "I needed Mama to understand I was as much a part of the Delta as the mango and almond trees, the mangrove swamps, the river, and the red earth" (273). By this, Watson shows Blessing's sense of "radical intimacy with other beings" (38), to use Morton's phrase, in the ecosystem which in turn is intended to create the awareness that the "destruction of some things will affect other things" (35) including humans.

Blessing's declarations above is critical to the reading of the novel from the perspective of ecological thought. By equating herself with trees, the mangrove swamps, the river, and the red earth, she provides the basis for everyone including the capitalists and the radical resistance groups to "have a very powerful argument for things" (Morton, 38) in the ecosystem as well as defend the ecosystem from further despoliation. This "powerful argument for things" resonates with Grandma's argument to end the continued pollution of the ecosystem:

> We no want dangerous gas burnt in all this pipeline fire, give us cancer, coughing, asthma, like our lungs are less important than any other place. We want our fruits to grow, our animals to be able to eat grass and not drop dead. We want to drink water that has no oil in it … (264, my emphasis)

Notice that Grandma's argument is a balanced one in two parts. First, she points out the health challenges posed on the peoples of the region. Second, she argues for healthy fruits and grass and the survival of animals. In this, Grandma equally treats humans as part of the ecosystem and ecosystem as part of humans without prioritising the one over the other. In Grandma, Watson tries to show the society the right way to view other life forms in the ecosystem and by so doing condemns the wanton disequilibrium of the ecosystem orchestrated by collusion of oil companies and the Nigerian Government.

Congruently, the pictures of water and air pollution that the novel paints serve to register Watson's resentment towards the oil companies for utter and long neglect of the ecosystem. The novel records, the "air smelled like a book unopened for a very long time, and smoky, as though the ground had been on fire" (12). Her invocation of an olfactory image and its comparison with

an unopened book "for a very long time" clearly exemplifies how long the ecosystem has been left unattended to. Watson also points out the fact that the pollution of the landscape also translates into that of the air, both of which combine and "made the sky look angry" (12) over its inhabitant. The novel further records, as "we travelled across the water the smell of oil from the river made me cover my mouth and nose with my scarf" (112). This scenario brings to mind Grandma's earlier instruction to Blessing on the drinkability of the water of Niger Delta region. According to her "we must not drink this. Only in emergencies … now, this water is full of oil, and salt, so only for washing clothes and bodies. Not for drinking" (20). By these depictions, Watson demonstrates the disconnection between the peoples of the region and their ecosystem while inhabiting it. She seems to suggest that the disconnection is a function of lack of the understanding on the part of the oil companies and the violent resisters that everything in the ecosystem is intricately bound up in symbiotic relationship which calls for are assessment of values in wealth creation and acquisitions in the modern capitalist age.

In conclusion, Tides, Oil on Water and Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away present impassioned accounts of the ecological crisis of the Niger Delta region. The common denominator of these novels is the great concern for the despoiled flora and fauna, the water, the air, the landscape and the atmosphere of death and dearth that hold sway in the Niger Delta region. The novels invite the readers to view everything in the ecosystem as possessing human values. The authors achieve this by deploying devices that make such a reading possible. The most noticeable of these devices is personification of the landscapes, the water bodies, the flora and fauna and everything that constitute the mesh in the novels. In Morton's words, all "life forms are the mesh, and so are all dead ones, as are their habitat which are also made up of living and nonliving beings" (29). This understanding makes the readers argue for the protection of the ecosystem from further despoliation by violence and oil exploitation.

Works Cited

Asoo, Ferdinand Iorbee. *The African novel and the realist tradition*. Makurdi: Aboki Publishers,

2006. Print.

_____. "The Niger delta in Prose Fiction: A Study of Isidore Okpewho's *Tides*."

The Ker Review 3.1 (2007). Print.

Eghagha, Hope. Emperor of Salvation. Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited, 2009. Print.

Feghabo, Cliff Charles. "Alienation and Ecoactivism in Selected Works on the Niger Delta Crises PhD thesis submitted to the Department of English, University of Ibadan, 2014. Print.

Gakwandi, Shatto Arthur. *The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa*. New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1977. Print.

Habila, Helon. *Waiting for an Angel*. Abuja: Cassava Republic, 2002. Print.

_____. *Oil on Water*. Lagos: Parresia Publishers Ltd, 2012. Print.

Iheka, N. Cajetan. "African Literature and the Environment: A Study in Postcolonial

Ecocriticism." A Dissertation Submitted to Michigan State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of English – Doctor of Philosophy, 2015.

Jeyifo, Biodun. *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*. United Kingdom:

Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.

Lindfors, Bernth, 'The famous authors' reputation test: an update to 1986.'János Riesz and

Alain Ricard (eds), *Semper Aliquid Novi: Litératurecomparée et littératuresd'Afrique: Mélanges Albert Gérard,* Tübingen, Gunter NarrVerlag, 1990: 131–43.

Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. Print.

Naipaul, V. S. *Miguel Street.* UK: Andre Deutsch, 1959. Print.

Nwoye, May Ifeoma. Oil Cemetery. Lagos: Parresia Publishers Ltd, 2015. Print.

Ogungbesan Kolawole."The Modern Writer and Commitment" Comp. and ed. Ker I. David.

Literature and Society in Africa. Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2004. Print.

Ojaide, Tanure. The Activist. Lagos: Farafina, 2006. Print.

Okpewho, Isidore. *Tides.* Lagos: Longman Nigeria Plc, 2003. Print.

Okonta, Ike and Oronto Douglas. *Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights, and Oil in Niger*

Delta. USA: Sierra Club Books, 2001. Web.

Philip Onoriode Aghoghovwia. "Ecocriticism and the Oil Encounter: Readings from the Niger

Delta."Dissertation presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University, 2014.

Saro-Wiwa, Ken. *On a darkling plain*. Port Harcourt: Saros International, 1989.

Ugwu, Chinonye Calista. "Ecological Degradation in Selected Niger Delta novels." A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English and Literary Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2014.

Watson, Christie. *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away*. Abuja: Cassava Republic, 2011. Print.